this love

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this love

by drunkonhall0ween

Summary

Charlie Dalton and Knox Overstreet over the course of five pivotal months.

Notes

hi everyone. i've had the idea and my notes for this fic collecting for a year before i finally decided to write it. a week later and this is what i came up with. i hope yall enjoy :)

September I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie Dalton was not someone who kept his emotions to himself. Charlie Dalton was also someone who mainly believed in fleeting moments of infatuation or attraction, rather than anything major. Both of these staples of Charlie's personality become non-existent when Knox Overstreet is mentioned. Fortunately for Charlie, he had his comedy skills (or lack thereof) readily available as a conversation buffer.

"Charlie. Charlie! Are you even listening to me?" Knox asks and Charlie is reminded that he actually isn't in the middle of a dramatic monologue, but rather studying in the living room with his best friend.

He responds, glancing at Knox before closing both of their textbooks and tossing them aside. "No. You're so boring that I almost just slipped into a coma. I don't want to study anymore."

Knox scoffs, "Okay, Charlie. What do you suggest we do instead? Fail our classes?"

Charlie rolls his eyes, "You are aware that it's only the second week of the semester, right? I doubt you'll fail if we give up now, unless you're dumber than I thought."

"Shut up," Knox says while shoving his head lightly. "If I fail, that means no hotshot lawyer Overstreet, which would lead to your death in prison from one of your various shenanigans since I wouldn't be able to defend you."

He laughs, "As if I would even trust you with my freedom! And what makes you think I'm dumb enough to get caught?"

Knox stands from the couch and stretches his arms above his head, his shirt rising and exposing his waist, before speaking, "Do I have to remind you that you were literally expelled from Welton? My eyes are up here, by the way. Caught you." Charlie barely manages to peel his eyes away from the gap between his shirt and the waistband of his pants, his vision practically blurring before catching Knox's eyes.

“Whatever, expulsion, criminal activity, prison, it all looks good on me. Everyone loves a bad boy.”

Knox fakes a gag as he walks away, heading into the kitchen.

It was just the two of them at home, with the rest of the group either in class or wandering around campus. Charlie never complained when he was alone with Knox, rather, he longed for it. Although he is an obviously charismatic person, even Charlie gets burnt out sometimes, and he doesn’t feel the constant need to be hilarious or be the greatest poet ever around Knox. He doesn’t have to perform when they’re together.

He remembers the first time he saw Knox after high school. He honestly thought he had gotten over his crush, as an entire two years had passed since the last time they saw each other. His expulsion from Welton was definitely not graceful, and he barely had the chance to say his goodbyes to everyone. After that Winter, it was harder to get in contact with the Poets and they just didn’t manage to see one another.

It was a miracle they were able to coordinate getting their undergraduate degrees done at the University of Washington together. He had really only made the effort to talk to Neil, constantly checking in with him. While it was Meeks’ idea to live together, Neil was the one who told Charlie about it and introduced him to the plan.

Charlie had walked through the front door, holding only one of his five bags, and straight into chaos. He caught glimpses of nearly all the Poets, but everyone was moving their things in and simply rushing past him. Oddly, he couldn’t get any words out, and he felt incredibly out of place and turned on his heel, preparing his apology to Neil and thinking if he could perhaps squeeze a place in the dorms, but before he could make it off the porch, a hand landed on his shoulder and spun him around. Unfortunately, this hand was attached to Charlie’s greatest weakness, and he could only mumble out an embarrassing, “Knox?” before capturing him in a crushing hug.

During the time of their embrace, Charlie felt as if he was swept back in time, his brain only registering the boy in front of him. He never wanted to let go of him.

That was last Fall, the start of their freshman year, and yet Charlie still feels the exact same way.

His reminiscing is interrupted by Knox returning to his spot next to

him on the couch, handing him a plate with a sandwich on it. “Thank you, Knoxious. I knew you would make the perfect housewife.”

“And I knew you would be utterly useless,” he says before tucking his foot under his other leg, his knee a constant, yet comforting, pressure against Charlie’s thigh.

They spend the rest of the afternoon making casual conversation, occasionally paying attention to the random show playing on the television.

The rest of the Poets drift back home slowly throughout the day, Pitts being the last. He collapses on the lounge chair (which Meeks pulled out of a dumpster) across from them, rubbing his temple, “Remind me why I want to be a doctor.”

Knox and Charlie share a glance before responding in unison, “Money.”

Todd strolls in, “And because you want to help people.”

Pitts sighs, obviously exhausted, “How is it only the second week of the semester? I’m drowning in labs, my professors are assholes, and I haven’t heard a single line of poetry in the last five days!”

Charlie jumps up, “Oh my god! My precious Pitts, how could we have starved you of the arts for so long? Everyone, gather your verses!”

They disperse and meet in the backyard a few minutes later, sitting in their misfit collection of lawn chairs. The meeting goes as usual, with Neil starting and the boys flowing through different poets and verses. Charlie considers it a success when he spots a smile on Pitts’ face after Knox reads comedic poem.

Todd closes with the final poem of the evening, opting for some Sylvia Plath, he speaks softly, “If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.”

Charlie does not register the rest of the poem, as he glances at the moon above him before looking over at Knox, who meets his eyes for a moment before returning his attention back to Todd.

Chapter End Notes

the Sylvia Plath poem read by Todd is "The Rival"

September II

September goes by slowly, days filled with warm air and outdoor studying. Charlie spends his evenings with the Poets or with other classmates, sharing a drink or getting coffee. At least two days out of the week were reserved for Knox, which consisted of convincing him to put his books down and simply watch a movie or series together. Unfortunately, one of these dedicated nights was disrupted by Meeks' decision to have a party at their house.

"Since when do we know so many people?" Todd asks, waiting as Charlie made him a drink.

He grabs a lime slice and throws it into Todd's glass before handing it to him, "I honestly thought there was going to be max. ten people at this thing. I guess Meeks is sort of famous. Also, enjoy that gin and tonic, pretty boy."

Neil joins them, wrapping his arm around Todd's waist as he practically melts against him, "Will you stop flirting with my boyfriend?"

The three of them laugh before Todd speaks, "Please, you know it's harmless. He's spoken for anyways," nodding his head in the direction of their roommate on the other side of the room.

Knox was leaning against the wall, in conversation with Meeks, Chris, and a few people that Charlie recognizes from one of their politics classes.

Charlie rolls his eyes and finishes off his drink before quickly preparing a new one, definitely pouring too much rum and too little coke. "Let's go find Pitts."

They wander the house for a while, and Charlie is grateful that although there's more people than he expected, the house isn't too crowded and he's able to walk around without being trapped between sweaty bodies. They find Pitts in his room, hunched over his laptop.

"I cannot believe my eyes right now," Neil speaks in a disapproving tone.

Pitts groans, "Please leave me alone. I need to finish this report."

Charlie leans on his desk, “Are you insane? It’s Friday night! Your report can wait. Let’s go have fun.”

“Seriously, I can’t. This is due on Monday.”

Neil joins him and sits on the opposite side of the desk, abruptly closing Pitts’ laptop as he turns around in his chair and desperately glances at Todd for help.

Todd sighs, “No more school. Let’s go. Charlie makes a mean gin and tonic.”

He smiles triumphantly, but before he has the chance to respond, their intervention is interrupted by Meeks bursting through the doorway, definitely more intoxicated than the rest of them. “Shots! Now! Poets need liquor!”

Meeks’ words seem to be the final piece of encouragement Pitts needed, because he gets up and mumbles a defeated “Fine,” and walks out of the room, the others trailing behind him.

They gather around the messy kitchen island, Knox suddenly appearing, bumping his shoulder into Charlie’s as Meeks is filling their assigned shot glasses. “What are we drinking?”

Meeks grins, “Tequila!”

“Oh god,” Pitts practically whimpers.

They get through a few rounds of shots, most of them tapping out after their third, while Meeks and Charlie manage to get through their fourth. Charlie prides himself on having a pretty high tolerance for alcohol but drinking with Meeks always leaves him wrecked.

He spends the next hour or so making drinks for his friends and classmates, happy with his newly acclaimed title of bartender. However, this also gets him roped into drinking more, taking occasional shots with those who invite him to.

A short while later, he finds himself on the couch, squeezed between Knox and Pitts, with various people surrounding them and different conversations flowing through the large group. Charlie tries speaking up when he hears something of interest, but he quickly realizes that the words leaving his mouth make little to no sense. He decides to simply relax on the couch and listen.

As the minutes pass, he finds it harder to pay attention to the others and is prepared to call it a night, but this decision was interrupted by a warm hand abruptly landing on his thigh.

It takes Charlie a few moments to process if the hand is actually there, and if it's actually the hand of the man sitting next to him. His eyes dart between Knox's face and his hand. He doesn't notice his panicked behavior, simply continuing whatever conversation he was having with the people across from them.

Charlie doesn't have a problem with casually touching Knox, such as an arm over the shoulder or bumping knees, but this was different. His grip is not loose or forced, it's comfortable, and his thumb is rubbing a simple pattern into the denim of his pants. But to Charlie, it felt as though there wasn't even a layer of clothing between them.

He spends the next few minutes laying stiff on the couch, watching Knox's hand rest on him, until his head turns toward him and he smiles at Charlie, "You look out of it. Want to go to bed?"

He nods, knowing his voice would betray him, and Knox gets up. Charlie misses his warmth immediately, but is relieved as he's offered his hand and pulled up from his seat. He stumbles, tripping over his own feet as they walk out of the living room and toward the stairs. Charlie thought he was done with any unexpected physical contact for the night, until Knox wraps his arm around his waist, pulling him against him.

He chuckles, "Jesus, Charlie, you can't even walk."

Walking was the last thing on Charlie's mind, he was trying to breathe. Knox's index finger, which had managed to slip under his shirt, was making it really hard to get air in his lungs. *I might die,* he thought.

Somehow, they made it to Charlie's shared room with Neil, and Knox gently placed him on his bed. "Thank you," Charlie slurred.

Knox shut the lights off and said, "Goodnight," before closing the door behind him.

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Charlie spent the next week recovering from the party, and constantly thinking about Knox's hand on his thigh, and Knox's hand on his waist, and Knox's hair, and Knox's pretty face. He was a schoolgirl

with a crush, which he determined was going to be the death of him. They didn't act like anything was out of the ordinary, and Charlie simply decided that Knox was being touchy because he was drunk, and because he probably would have fallen down the stairs if he wasn't being held.

Nothing special.

He made sure not to mention it to Neil, who would come up with some grand theory and get his hopes up. He knew Knox wasn't interested in boys, and if he was, he wouldn't be interested in him.

It was the last few days of the month and Charlie's workload was getting worse, he didn't dare to say it out loud, but he was starting to feel like Pitts. He was also slightly annoyed by Chris constantly coming around the house, hanging out with the Poets, but mainly with Knox. Yesterday, he had to actively fight the urge to tell her she should start paying rent. During his walk home from his last class today, he starts to think that he should've just said it.

Once he gets to the house, he immediately heads to his room and drops his bag on the floor before collapsing on his bed. He's granted a few minutes of peace before the door opens. "Get out," he groans without looking up.

He feels the bed dip as someone sits at the end, "Come on, it's me, I'm your favorite."

Charlie turns over slowly before sitting up, "Neil is my favorite."

Knox rolls his eyes, "Yeah, sure." They sit in silence for a while before he speaks again, "What's wrong?"

"I'm, I don't know. I'm struggling with my classes. So much shit to do, feel like I'm drowning," Charlie sighs.

"Okay, so," Knox starts, but Charlie interrupts him, as he gets off the bed and starts pacing around the room, speaking in a louder tone.

"Like why do I have three different essays and a group project to do? When my partners are incompetent? Don't even get me started on how I completely bombed my lab today. Had no clue what I was doing. Pretty sure I'm going to fail the class. And my professor, oh my god, he is an absolute mess,"

Knox tries to cut in again, but he keeps going, "And I feel like I

haven't seen you guys at all this week. I'm always studying and there's literally no time, and we haven't had a meeting in forever."

"Charlie,"

He can't stop himself, "And why is Chris always here? I don't have a problem with her, she's a nice girl, but can't she just go home? Every day I walk into this house and it's like she's our new roommate! I bet she's downstairs right now, laughing and smiling,"

He manages to stop talking only when he realizes he is being kissed. That Knox is kissing him right now. One of his hands is gently holding his jaw, and his lips are *so soft,* he didn't even notice he was standing right in front of him, and *oh my god do something.* He begins to lift his hand with the goal of placing it on Knox's arm, but he pulls away before Charlie gets the chance.

"I, uh, I have to go," He mumbles before abruptly turning around and walking out of the room.

Charlie gets back in his bed and simply stares at the ceiling in shock. He wanted to follow him, but his legs wouldn't move past the door. An hour or two later, Neil walks in and finds him in the same state. "Did you have a stroke or something?"

He can't raise his voice past a whisper, "Or something."

Neil gives him a confused look, "Okay… Do you want dinner? Todd made spaghetti." He wants to say no, but he hasn't eaten anything since breakfast. He nods and stands slowly, following Neil to the kitchen.

Todd prepares a bowl for him and he eats in silence, simply listening as the rest of the group chats casually.

Between topics, Meeks questions "Where's Knox?"

Pitts answers with his mouth full, "Went over to Chris' place."

Charlie drops his fork, feeling his appetite leave his body. He feels like he might throw up, and his head starts to spin, he considers dropping out of school, or maybe he'll just move out. Neil bumps his knee under the table and Charlie meets his gaze, pulling him out of his Shakespearean tragedy and providing him with some reassurance without even saying anything.

October I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They avoid each other for a while. Charlie stops counting after four days. He skips their shared classes. He doesn't leave his room if he hears Knox is home.

Unfortunately, he was caught off guard today, and bumps into him in the kitchen.

"Oh, sorry," Knox says, stepping out of the way.

Charlie forces a polite smile, "No, it's my bad." He fills a glass of water for himself and drinks it quickly.

"How did your group project go?"

He wants to bash his head into the fridge rather than engage in small talk with the man he's been in love with for nearly six years. "Fine. One of my partners dropped out. Tough times."

Knox laughs, but it sounds forced, "Yeah."

Charlie considers moving out again, but his thoughts are interrupted by Todd entering the kitchen, "Hey guys. Backyard in five?"

He sends Todd a glance which he can hopefully interpret as a *thank you for saving my life I don't know what I would do without you.*

They separate and Charlie grabs the first book of poetry he sees on his bookshelf, not really caring for selection at the moment. He heads outside and sits between Meeks and Neil. Knox, clearly dedicated to torturing him, sits directly across from him. The group decides on light poetry for today, rather than verses consisting of existential dread and unrequited love. The opposite of Charlie's current emotions.

Pitts reads a painfully delightful Wordsworth poem and Charlie stands once he's finished. "Feeling a bit thirsty. I'll be back," and he rushes into the house.

He rinses his face with cold water from the kitchen sink and fights the urge to cry, while simultaneously trying to get air in his lungs. He

thought nothing would ever happen between him and Knox, and now something has, and their friendship is suffering because of it.

What the hell is going on with me, he thinks. His almost-panic attack is interrupted by the patio door opening, and Charlie knows it's Knox, but he can't bring himself to look up, to acknowledge his best friend.

Knox's voice is shaky as he speaks, "I want to apologize. I need to apologize. I honestly don't know what I was thinking. I shouldn't have, uh, done that. I wasn't thinking right, and you were so stressed, and I didn't know how to help."

He steps closer to him, leaning against the fridge. "And then I completely freaked out because, obviously, why the hell would I kiss you, and it just became this whole thing. I didn't know what to say to you. It was so weird. You're my best friend. I'm so sorry."

Although Charlie knew there was no legitimate or real reason behind the kiss, it still hurts him to hear Knox's clarification. He ignores the pain of that and decides to focus on how the pair can still be friends, "Don't worry about it. I haven't been thinking straight lately either and I honestly didn't have the energy to figure that entire thing out," is what he comes up with, and he's disgusted by his own words, by his inability to just tell him the truth, by his crippling fear of losing him and tearing apart their lives.

Knox smiles hesitantly, "Can we stop being weird now?"

Charlie can't fight his grin, "Yes, you freak. Now let's go back outside and listen to everyone's happy poems." They step back outside together, Knox giving his shoulder a squeeze before they separate and return to their spots.

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They decide to spend the next morning at the library together, Knox reading chapters out of an ancient textbook while Charlie agonizes over political theory. They're tucked away in a small corner of the library, hidden by rows of shelves. Charlie runs his finger over the letters engraved in the table, tracing out the word 'Poets' which Meeks had carved last Winter.

Knox kicks his foot lightly under the table before speaking, "You good? You haven't even tried to distract me this whole time."

Charlie smiles, "Just a little tired." He was still feeling a bit burnt out,

although he had managed to catch up with most of his schoolwork.

“I can grab us some coffee,” he offers, standing from the table.

These random gestures of kindness leave Charlie reeling, but he manages to nod his head, “That would be so great. Thanks.”

“Be back in ten,” he responds before walking away, slipping into the sea of bookshelves.

Charlie pulls out his phone immediately and texts Neil.

neil help

What do you want. My class is about to start

knox driving me crazy :/

This is not a new development. Just think of Cameron instead.

EW. ur sick

He laughs quietly and tucks his phone away, returning to read the same sentence he’s been trying to get through for the last ten minutes. He manages to finish the page before Knox returns, placing their cups on the table. Charlie takes a sip and sighs in relief. Their campus cafés may be over-priced, but they sure know how to make a good cup of coffee.

“Good?” Knox asks before sitting down.

“Yeah. Thank you, Knoxious. Told you you’re the perfect housewife.”

He rolls his eyes, “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the special ones,” Charlie responds, taking the risk.

Knox laughs, “Whatever. Do your readings,” he gestures toward Charlie’s laptop.

They manage to get their desired work for the day done, Charlie only bothering Knox a total of six times. His most successful was a game of footsies an hour ago, resulting in their legs being tucked under one another beneath the table. They leave the library shortly after noon, Knox leading the way home, opening doors for him. Charlie tries not to dwell on it.

The walk home from the library is a long one, but he can't find a reason to complain as the pair stroll through campus, surrounded by colorful leaves and sunshine. He peaks a glance at Knox, his hair slightly messy from the wind, his face illuminated by the sun, and he feels his heart clench within him.

Knox catches his eye, "Caught you," he says, but they don't look away from each other.

Charlie struggles to find a response. How is he supposed to justify ogling his best friend? After a moment, he scoffs, "I thought there was a bug on you. Turns out it was just your face." He fights the urge to cringe, that was definitely not one of his best remarks.

The other man laughs and turns his head, finally breaking their eye contact. "Shut up, Charlie."

The remainder of their walk is filled with their typical bickering, Knox even calling him his old nickname at one point, "Sure, Nuwanda. Want some red lipstick?" Charlie's filled with embarrassment at the reminder of his high school theatrics, and he turns abruptly.

"I'll just head back to the library if you keep bringing up the past," he says, feigning annoyance and taking a few steps away. He knows he's not going to really walk away, and he knows Knox is going to stop him. This is just some casual fun.

Until he feels Knox's hand slip into his and pull him back. Charlie brings his gaze to Knox's face, and he fails to find a trace of any light-hearted comedy in his eyes. He also fails to form any words, simply staring at him like a fool.

Knox finally speaks after what feels like a century, but couldn't have been more than a minute, "You're so dramatic. Besides, red looks good on you." Charlie thinks his brain has malfunctioned and he doesn't even try to form a response. All he feels is his heart thumping in his chest, rapidly.

His eyes betray him and they flicker to Knox's lips, dwelling on them for a significant amount of time. He remembers how soft they were and all rational thought leaves his brain. *Fuck it just do it* and he leans forward a miniscule amount.

He pauses when Knox drops his hand and takes a step back, "We're almost home," he mutters. Charlie composes himself, putting a smile on his face and continuing their walk.

He adds this moment to the list of things he has to pretend never happened in order to maintain his sanity.

Chapter End Notes

the painfully delightful Wordsworth poem read by Pitts is "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"

October II

The mid-October air was chilly and left Charlie shivering as he walked into one of the university's few theatres. He quickly spotted the rest of the Poets, sitting as close to the stage as possible, and made his way over to them.

"Hey. When does it start?" He asks the group while sitting down next to Todd.

"Five minutes," Pitts replies.

Tonight is the night of the drama class's first play of the year. Earlier in the month Neil announced that he's playing the lead role in Death of a Salesman. Todd is so excited he can barely stay seated.

He glances at their group and makes eye contact with Knox, sitting on the opposite end, they share a quick smile before the lights dim and the curtains open.

When Neil appears on stage, Charlie notices Todd grinning, absolutely enamored with his boyfriend.

The play goes well, it goes "absolutely, fucking amazing" in Meeks' words, and the Poets wait for Neil outside. When he finally steps out of the theatre, Todd runs into his arms, kissing him before the doors have even shut.

"Alright, give the lovebirds some space," Knox announces, and the group shifts over, but Charlie still manages to overhear pieces of their conversation.

"God, you were the best. I'm so proud of you,"

Neil's smile can be heard through his words, "I couldn't have done it without you. I love you."

Charlie feels so incredibly happy for the two of them he doesn't even feel the cold wind biting at his cheeks anymore. They join the group shortly after, everyone congratulating Neil accordingly.

Charlie hugs him, "I forgot to throw my bra on stage, you were still great, though," and Neil rolls his eyes but hugs him tighter.

On the walk home, Neil interrupts the ongoing conversation, "Oh! I

almost forgot to tell you guys, there's about to be a party at our house in twenty minutes."

"Neil, it's a Tuesday night," Pitts sighs.

"I know, but all the drama kids were so happy and I couldn't say no to them."

Forty minutes later, Charlie was surrounded by a bunch of theatre kids and thankfully, a few recognizable faces. He doesn't let Knox leave his side. "Charlie, do you realize you're weirder than half of these people? They're probably scared of you," he says, yet he doesn't remove his arm from its resting place over Charlie's shoulders.

"Shut up, Knoxious. Here's your drink," he passes him a rum and coke before making his own. "This is my only drink of the night. Nothing else."

Knox laughs, "Traumatized from last month?"

"Absolutely," he responds before taking a sip of his drink.

They find their usual spot on the couch, but Charlie is shocked to see Cameron sitting on the lounge chair. "What the fuck is he doing here?"

"Who knows. Just ignore him." Knox guides him to sit down before comfortably settling in next to him.

Charlie jumps into a lively conversation with one of Neil's classmates, a woman named Melissa who was in the play tonight, while Knox chats with her boyfriend.

"Honestly, Broadway seems like an absolute dream. I think you should go for it. No matter what it takes," he tells her.

"You are so motivational. I can't handle it!" She laughs before standing up and asking, "Do you want another drink?"

Knox tilts his head slightly upon hearing this, smirking at him, "Yeah, Charlie, do you want another drink?"

He sighs and ponders for a moment, earning another giggle from Melissa. "Yes. I do."

Knox sits up and yells, "I knew it!" before leaning back into the sofa, dropping his hand onto Charlie's thigh. He's sober enough to handle it

this time, but also not sober enough to stop himself from resting his arm on the back of the couch, his hand meeting the back of Knox's neck, his fingers slightly tangled into his hair. The other man doesn't react aside from relaxing into his touch.

His bliss is interrupted by a voice he thought he left at Welton, "Wow Knox, I didn't know you swung both ways, especially not with him."

Charlie is out of his seat and in front of Cameron almost instantly, "Get the fuck out of my house."

Cameron attempts to mask his fear, but Charlie reads through him. "No need to get so defensive over your boy,"

He cuts him off, "Remember the last time I hit you? I'm not scared of doing it again,"

Knox tugs at his shoulders, speaking quickly, "Charlie, come on, just leave it,"

"Remember when I got you expelled? Good times," Cameron grins, actually grins, and Charlie thinks he might go insane. He grabs his shirt and pulls him out of his chair, slamming him against the closest wall. Surprisingly, he doesn't get a chance to hit him, because Knox is pulling him off and dragging him away, with Meeks and Pitts stepping in and dealing with Cameron.

Knox pulls them up the stairs and into his room, closing the door behind them, "Calm down, he's just an attention seeking asshole."

Charlie ignores him, "I hate him. Who says that shit at a party? Like it's his business what we, I mean, what you do,"

"Charlie, don't worry about it," he says, placing a calming hand on his arm.

He sighs, "I can't! He's always been such an annoying, nosy, stupid, useless, piece of," and he pauses, noticing Knox leaning towards his lips. He panics for a moment, caught between rational thought and his emotions.

He speaks quickly before his judgement is clouded, "Stop," and he moves back, "Why do you keep doing that! I need you to stop kissing me every time you can't calm me down!"

Knox stutters out an answer, pulling his hand off him, "I, I'm sorry. I

wasn't thinking,"

Charlie throws his hands in the air, unable to mask his frustration, "Of course! You don't have to think twice about kissing me, or touching me, or anything like that because you don't spend every waking moment wondering if this," he gestures between them, "is mutual, or real, or if it's all in your head! You are driving me insane, Knox! And I really, really, can't handle another kiss because I am quite literally on the verge of ruining our entire friendship."

Knox doesn't respond, and Charlie feels his entire world crumble around him. He's definitely going to have to move out after this.

He needs to find Neil. And another drink. And maybe Cameron so he can punch him. He walks to the door, "I can't do this. I thought I could live with just being your best friend. But at this point, it's killing me," sparing one last glance at him before he walks into the hallway.

He makes it to the staircase before he hears Knox following him, and he turns around to meet him, desperately hoping for him to say something, but he only leads them back to his room.

Charlie is about to start yelling after the fifth second of silence, but Knox starts to speak, "I don't know how to deal with this. For the last year, or maybe even longer than that, all I've thought about is you. I can't handle it. I kiss you randomly because I literally cannot come up with a good time to do it. And then I panic because I've never done this before, not with a guy, and not with my best friend, and it messes everything up and I act like a stupid teenager. I can't keep my hands off you, I'll do anything to get close to you. I felt like shit after the last party for touching you, for taking you to bed, we were so drunk and I wanted to kiss you so bad, Charlie, you don't even know. I sit across from you at dinner, at Poets meetings, in class, and all I can think about is kissing you. It's excruciating."

He speaks softly, taking Knox's hand, "Kiss me now," and he doesn't hesitate to connect their lips. It's slow, not panicked, not rushed, and it's not going to end with an apology.

He brushes his tongue against him and deepens their kiss before blindly walking backwards until the back of his knees hit the bed, and they separate briefly to properly get situated, with Charlie quickly pulling Knox on top of him and between his legs. They meet in the middle and he slides a hand into his hair, tugging him closer.

They stay like this for minutes, hours, until they're exhausted. Knox

pulls away from him slightly. “We should really get some sleep,” he says before pressing his lips to Charlie’s jaw, and then his neck.

He bites back a moan and tilts his head to the side, giving him more access. He struggles to form a coherent sentence, his brain entirely occupied by the man on top of him, who is now slipping his hands under his shirt, warmth blossoming across his torso.

He manages a few words, “You’re insufferable, we need to go take an ice-cold shower.”

Knox pauses before grinning, “Together?”

Charlie laughs, pushing him off gently and sitting up, “That completely defeats the purpose.”

“Fine. Let’s go to bed,” he glances at his cell phone, “I have class in three hours.”

“We. We have class in three hours,” he forces himself off the bed, preparing to leave.

“Where are you going?”

Charlie gestures at the door, “To my room? To go to sleep?”

Knox grabs his hand gently, “Why not sleep here?” and Charlie almost dives back into the bed. He thought his life was hard before this. How is he supposed to spend a minute away from this man?

“We need some boundaries, Knoxious,” he finds himself frowning at his own words.

His thumb starts to rub a pattern onto Charlie’s hand, and he feels like he might melt, “You can’t call me Knoxious anymore. Not when we’ve made out for three hours straight,” he pauses, looking at him with absolute affection in his eyes, “One night. Please.”

Charlie doesn’t have the strength to fight him, he probably wouldn’t have even made it to the door in the first place. He kisses him again and feels his smile against his lips. “Fine. Let me go change, you clingy bastard.”

Knox lets go of his hand and Charlie leaves, while he still has the will to do so. He hears muffled conversation from downstairs, and he’s shocked that the party is still going on. He steps into his room and

finds Neil and Todd talking. *Very PG-13 of them,* he thinks. “Sorry, came for clothes,” he says, suddenly feeling shy.

“I assume you’re sleeping in my room, then?” Todd asks.

Charlie nods, grabbing his sleepwear, “If that’s okay with you?”

Neil laughs, “I’ll take care of him in here, don’t worry.”

Charlie cringes, and Todd blushes, “Neil, please. Goodnight, Charlie.”

He throws a salute their way before walking out and heading back to Knox’s room. He takes his shirt off as he speaks, “Neil and Todd are totally going to fuck on my bed. Those nasty little poets. Neil didn’t even try and hide it!”

He finishes changing and folds his other clothes, placing them on the desk chair. When he turns, he sees Knox resting on his elbows, simply watching him.

“Caught you,” Charlie says before getting into bed next to him.

“You’re so beautiful,” Knox responds without hesitation, his tone filled with earnest, and Charlie feels the blood rush to his cheeks.

“Stop. You’re too romantic,” he replies, fitting himself against Knox’s side, draping his arm over his chest. Knox reaches over and shuts the lamp on his bedside table off.

“Goodnight.”

He finds his hand in the darkness and intertwines their fingers, “Night.”

-

Their alarm rings all too soon, and Charlie groans, “Turn it off. No class,” pushing himself deeper into Knox. Suddenly, the warm body next to him disappears, and Charlie opens his eyes slightly to see him grabbing some clothes before turning back toward him.

Knox’s voice is groggy and full of sleep, “I’m going to go shower. We can get coffee before class.” He presses a kiss to Charlie’s forehead before leaving the room.

The morning voice, paired with the forehead kiss, combined with the invite for coffee leaves Charlie spinning. There is no way he is going

to pay attention in class today, or maybe ever.

November

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Knox and Charlie spend most of their time behind closed doors, making out, tugging at each other's clothing, and occasionally reciting poetry. They're an absolute cliché. Charlie thinks that a nuclear war wouldn't be able to pull him off Knox when he's panting beneath him.

Although, they have managed to stop spending the night together, with Neil and Todd helping them enforce a strict midnight curfew. They haven't had the chance to tell the other Poets yet, and they agreed that it would be best if they stuck to their regular sleeping arrangements.

Charlie's walking home after his last class of the day. He sends a text to their household group chat, *pizza for dinner? :) pls*

He decides that it's too cold to leave his bare hands exposed to hold his phone while waiting for responses. He tucks them back into his pockets and picks up his pace, his desire for a warm, sheltered space growing.

He jumps as someone appears next to him suddenly, bumping his shoulder. A grin spreads across his face, "What are you doing out here in the cold?"

Knox smiles back at him, "Figured I should pick you up from class. Don't want you dying of hypothermia before you get home."

Charlie tries to ignore the effect the man's chivalry has on him, "You're just in time. I'm about to drop, honestly."

Knox tosses an arm around his shoulders, pulling him closer, "I can think of a lot of ways to keep you warm, but I think we should spare the eyes of our classmates. Come on, we're almost home."

His mind races, imagining the two of them in bed at home. "Since when did you become a sexual deviant?"

"I don't know. I think you're a terrible influence on me."

"You're the one who can't keep your hands off me!" He protests.

“Making up for lost time,” he replies before stopping, turning Charlie toward him and cupping his face gently before joining their lips. After a few moments they pull apart, and neither of them feel very cold anymore.

They hold hands for the remainder of the walk, and Charlie sighs in relief when they finally enter the house. After they take their coats off, he pulls off Knox’s hat, running his fingers through his hair. The other man smiles softly and merely watches him.

“Uh, did you guys order the pizza yet?” Meeks’ voice fills the air, and the pair jump apart.

Charlie turns to face him, “No. We just got home. Do you want me to order it?” he grabs his phone from his jacket pocket.

“No, it’s cool. I’ll do it. I just wanted to make sure we weren’t going to have a double order, or something,” he responds before looking down at his phone, “Same as usual?”

Charlie is about to answer him when Knox slips his hand beneath his shirt, caressing his waist before coming to rest on his lower back. He manages to fight the urge to immediately relax against him, to respond by holding his arm or kissing him wherever possible. However, he’s unable to contain his entire reaction, and a squeak escapes him.

Their friend glances up, but from where he’s leaning against the wall, it simply seems as though the pair are just standing there. Knox casually checks his phone as Charlie nods his head, “Yes. The usual.”

He sees Meeks open his mouth to ask another question, but Knox cuts him off, “You know what, I completely forgot we have a quiz this week! Right, Charlie?”

“Yes! You’re completely right! We have to go study, like right now. Sorry, Meeks.” By the time he finishes his sentence, they’re halfway up the stairs. Once they’re in Knox’s room, Charlie pushes him against the door, kissing him deeply.

They pull apart and Knox leads him to the bed, pushing him down gently, and assuming his fixed position between his legs. “You’re insane. Meeks did not deserve that.”

“Sorry. I was getting bored,” he says before pushing Charlie’s shirt up, and he understands, lifting his back off the mattress and taking it off.

He mumbles, “Yours too,” and Knox listens to him, tossing his shirt aside before leaning back down and sucking a mark on to Charlie’s collarbone.

Charlie places one hand on his jaw and the other at the back of his head, urging him to look up. “Kiss me,” he pleads, unsure why he doesn’t do it himself.
Knox doesn’t waste a moment before complying, holding his chin and connecting their lips. They could do this for the rest of their lives.

Charlie still struggles to believe how good they are at it, how they fit together so well. He thinks he could write a collection of poems about the endless number of hours they could spend like this.

He doubts its healthy, and he’s probably turning into a sex maniac, but when Knox’s knee grazes between his legs, he doesn’t care about anything else.

He flips them over, pinning Knox to the bed, his fingertips dragging across his waistband, silently asking for permission.

“Yeah,” he breathes out, and Charlie makes quick work of taking his pants and briefs off, but he doesn’t touch him. Instead, he makes his way back up and they start kissing again. After a few minutes they separate and Knox rests his head on his shoulder, panting. “Touch me, please,” he whispers and Charlie twitches in his pants.

“You want me to listen to you now after that stunt you pulled in the hall?” He slides his hands up his thighs, inching closer.

“Charlie,” he begs.

He gives in and wraps a hand around him, using his other to push him back against the mattress. He pumps him slowly, agonizingly slowly, and Knox throws his head back, nearly shaking beneath him. He speaks in a strained tone, “You’re an asshole.”

“Tell me what you want,” he says, dropping his head lower, his lips brushing the tip.

Knox manages a laugh, “I’m not going to give you the satisfaction.”

Charlie takes his hands off him, grinning, “What a shame. I really wanted to taste you.”

The other man groans and Charlie takes hold of his hand, and Knox

lifts his head. He decides he's feeling extra devious today, and he slips his mouth around his thumb, never breaking eye contact.

Knox's entire body shivers as he watches him. He doesn't think he's ever been this desperate in his life. Charlie pops off, lips slightly swollen, eyes clouded with lust, and he can't take it anymore, "I want your mouth, Charlie, please,"

"Was that so hard?" He says before abruptly going down on him, using his hand where his mouth doesn't reach. Charlie knows he has a particular level of skill with his mouth, and they've barely scraped the surface. He pulls off and licks a stripe along the side, resulting in a frail moan from Knox which he stores away in his brain.

It doesn't take much longer for Knox to be mumbling, "Going to come," paired with constant repetitions of Charlie's name. He coaxes him through his orgasm and swallows quickly, hoping that the taste won't linger in his mouth.

After a minute or two, Knox sits up, placing a hand on his jaw and pulling him in for a slow kiss. He tugs Charlie's pants down, wrapping a hand around him and moving at a steady pace, his thumb occasionally running over the tip. Charlie keeps his face buried in his neck, moaning against his skin. He finishes fast, embarrassingly fast, but can't bring himself to care as they collapse on the bed.

They lay there for a while, long enough for Charlie to nearly fall asleep as Knox traces patterns on his shoulder.

He says something that Charlie doesn't register, his brain too sluggish. "What did you say?" He asks.

Knox repeats himself, "You, the moon. You, the road. You, the little flowers by the side of the road."

-

They force themselves to separate, taking individual showers. Over dinner, Charlie makes conversation with Meeks, which goes smoothly without the burden of Knox's large, distracting hands. He leaves shortly after, inviting Charlie to the movie theatre where he's meeting Todd and Pitts. He declines, knowing he has an essay due for his class tomorrow morning.

Neil and Knox join him a while after Meeks leaves, both men piling a few slices of pizza on to their plates.

“By the way, it’s impossible to run lines with you two across the hall,” Neil says as he sits down next to Charlie.

Knox’s face flushes red as he responds, “I thought we were pretty quiet.”

“Yeah, maybe if I was deaf.”

Charlie scoffs, “Don’t think I don’t know what used to go down in your dorm with Todd at Welton after I left. Knox told me of the numerous nights he had to guard your door.”

Knox mumbles, “Without headphones.”

“We’re just making even,” he says, reaching over and placing his hand on the patch where Knox’s shoulder meets his neck. He caresses the tender skin and doesn’t miss the grateful look Knox throws his way.

Neil laughs, “As happy as I am that you guys are finally dating, I need a break from this,” he stands from the table with his plate and Charlie hears his footsteps going up the stairs.

He’s about to crack a joke when he realizes the man has gone stiff under his touch, his eyes clouded with something Charlie doesn’t recognize.

“What’s wrong?” He asks hesitantly, preparing for his newfound reality to shatter and for Knox to state that he’s simply sick of him. He doesn’t receive an answer, so he tries again, “Talk to me,” speaking softly.

“What, what are we doing?” Knox says, his voice barely above a whisper. Charlie visualizes moving into the dorms, never attending another Poets meeting, dropping off the face of the earth.

“What do you mean?” He manages, withdrawing his hand.

Knox finally lifts his head and meets his eye, “What are we doing, Charlie? Are we just screwing around, or, or what?

Charlie opens his mouth and starts speaking before his brain can even register his thoughts, “Knox, we have spent almost every waking moment with each other for the last three weeks. We spend hours together, you pick me up from class, you’re always texting me stupid emojis to describe your day. I thought I was your boyfriend,” he pauses, feeling relieved as he sees a growing smile on the other man’s

face.

“And that doesn’t even include the sex. I can’t disregard the fact that your dick is in my mouth at least once a day.”

Knox blushes and lets a chuckle slip before he responds in a serious tone, “I’ve never done this with a guy before. I don’t know if it works the same way. I don’t know if we’re just hooking up, like we’re friends with benefits, or if this is the real thing.”

Charlie takes his hands and holds them in his, “Do you think I do this with all the Poets?” and they both laugh before he continues, “I want to be with you, to date you, to love you, for as long as you’ll have me.” He realizes that this is the first time he’s said the word out loud, ‘love,’ this entire time. He’s shocked that it hasn’t slipped out before, mumbled against Knox’s skin, pressing the words into him.

Knox eases any of his outstanding worries by leaning over and pressing a meaningful kiss to his lips. “I love you,” he says as they separate, and Charlie imagines moving out again, but this time it’s two years in the future with Knox by his side.

Chapter End Notes

> Knox's "You, the moon. You, the road. You, the little flowers by the side of the road," is an excerpt from Richard Siken's "Road Music"

December I

Chapter Notes

> trigger warning for suicide in this chapter. if this tw applies to you, please skip past the italics near the beginning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Poets make it through their finals, but not without difficulty. Charlie spent a few of his nights crying on the living room floor with Meeks and Pitts, all three of them on the verge of burning their notebooks. His days were filled with frantically writing essays with Todd, and helping Neil run lines. Knox was always there, a constant comfort in the room, working on his own assignments and providing caffeine when needed.

They decide against throwing a party to celebrate the end of the semester, all of them agreeing on an evening with just the six of them, as well as some alcohol and poetry. Which is where Charlie finds himself, his eyes trailing on Neil's face as he reads an Albert Camus poem.

"For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger, something better, pushing right back," he finishes, his eyes glassy when he looks up.

Charlie leans over, taking his hand and squeezing it gently. Todd speaks quietly, "We wouldn't be here without you, Neil."

"Neither would I," he responds, and the group falls silent. They all remember that dreaded night at Welton, hearing the news of their leader in the hospital, just a mere few hours after he had received a standing ovation.

Todd was the first to know something was wrong, who ran into Charlie's dorm in a complete panic, barely able to talk, "Look, look at this. Charlie, what is this supposed to mean?" At this point, he had only heard Todd say about twenty words in the last three months and he was extremely confused, taking the phone from Todd's hand which he was gesturing wildly at.

The message on the screen simply read, 'I was really good. I'm sorry' and Charlie felt his heart drop.

“He went home with his parents after the play, right?” he asks, attempting to make sense of the situation.

Todd nods his head frantically, “Yes. Yes. Remember we couldn’t even talk to him?”

He remembers Neil’s father’s constant disapproving tone, agonizing rules, and hatred of the arts, and he freezes, unable to move, or speak, or even console Todd.

Todd managed to gather the rest of the Poets and they decided to call emergency services to Neil’s house, all of them shaking with anxiety. A few hours later they found out what had happened, Neil sending his message to Todd before gathering whatever he could find in his mother’s medicine cabinet.

In the following days up until his expulsion, Charlie spent his afternoons at Welton and his nights at Neil’s bedside.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, all of them thinking of the same event, before Neil clears his throat and stands, “No more dwelling on the past. I’m still here. You guys are still here. We finished the first semester of our second year!” he pauses, “And Pitts is going to be a freaking doctor in ten years!”

Various laughs and cheers fill the room and Charlie gets up, grabbing his drink, “A toast. A toast to the Dead Poets Society which is miraculously still alive,” the rest of the group joins him and they clash their mismatched cups together, smiles spreading across their faces.

They end the meeting officially and Charlie steps away to grab a few bottles of cheap wine from the fridge. He returns quickly and places them on the coffee table, and before he can take a seat, he feels a familiar hand on his hip and he leans back, resting on Knox’s chest.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says, tilting his head to look at him.

“Hi,” Knox responds, and he can tell that he’s slightly inebriated, cheeks rosy and a permanent smile etched onto his face. His eyes flicker to Charlie’s lips and he meets him in the middle, both of them moving slowly, not yet feeling the overwhelming desire for *more.* He places a delicate hand on Knox’s jaw, caressing his cheek when they separate.

They’re pulled out of their haze by Meeks, “Can you guys make out somewhere else? We’re trying to play cards here,” and Charlie is

reminded that they're not tucked away in a bedroom, or a quiet classroom, or a vacant hall, and they're actually standing in front of the rest of the Poets in the middle of the living room.

He waits for Knox to panic, but rather, he wraps his arms around Charlie's middle. He ignores the joyful nerves in his chest and finds a response, "You're not even playing real cards. That's Uno."

Meeks glares at him, "It requires the same level of concentration as any other game of cards! Go blow Knox in your room."

Charlie finds a seat, "I think I would rather kick your ass in this very, very, serious game."

-

They spend the next few days lounging around the house. Charlie, Knox, and Pitts have claimed the couch as their territory, all three of them bundled under various blankets and drifting between sleep and watching reruns of classic sitcoms.

The Poets have solidified their plans for the holidays, with all of them, except Charlie, heading home on the 24th and returning to campus after New Year's.

"Are you sure you don't want to come home with me?" Neil asks Charlie for the tenth time since he found out his parents went on vacation for the holidays. They're sitting on the floor next to each other, re-arranging the bookshelf in their room.

Charlie sighs, "Neil, I love you, but you couldn't pay me to spend time with your dad. Anyways, I have to stick around here and keep the house warm in case any of you need to escape your wicked family members."

"Of course. What would we do without you?"

He exaggerates his tone, "I ask myself that question every day!"

They share a laugh and continue with their task, Charlie stacking the books haphazardly and Neil scolding him before adjusting them.

-

They're lying in bed, Knox's head resting on Charlie's chest as he re-reads one of his favorite books, when his phone rings. "It's my mom,"

he says before peeling himself off Charlie and stepping into the hallway.

He doesn't get the chance to say hello before his mother's voice shrieks through the phone, "Knox! Aren't you so excited to come home?"

"Hi, mom. Yeah, I can't wait," he responds, attempting to force some enthusiasm into his voice. He doesn't exactly dread going home for the holidays, but he would rather not deal with his father's political ramblings and his mother's constant interest in his romantic life.

"Are you going to bring any guests? Maybe a special girl?"

He fights the urge to hang up the phone. "Nope. Just me," he thinks of Charlie waiting for him in bed, with his caring eyes and tender hands, and tries to think of a way to end the conversation. He hears muffled speech on the other end and considers simply hanging up, but he's interrupted.

"Your father says he spoke to the dean yesterday. He says you're a bright student and," she pauses, and Knox knows she's talking to his father. She continues, "And he sees you on campus often. Always with that Dalton boy."

Knox considers the number of times he's walked around campus with Charlie, holding hands and sharing kisses, and his stomach twists.

His father's voice catches him off-guard, "Son, he says that the two of you seem very close. Do I have to remind you to focus on your studies? And to stop spending your time with delinquents?" He feels sick, suddenly overwhelmingly hot.

He croaks out a response, "No, no, sir."

His father's tone is firm, "Good. I don't want to hear any more about this. See you soon," and the call ends. He stumbles to the bathroom and sits on the cool tile, breathing heavily as he re-plays the conversation in his mind.

He's not sure how long he sits there, only standing when he doesn't feel the need to dry heave into the toilet anymore.

He returns to his room and finds a barely awake Charlie who waves him over, "Come to bed," he mumbles. He complies, shutting off the light and slipping under the duvet. Charlie curls into him, burying his

face in Knox’s neck.

He thinks of his mother’s suggestion of a girlfriend, of his father’s strict tone, and of how both of them view Charlie. He doesn’t sleep.

Chapter End Notes

> the Albert Camus poem read by Neil at the start is "Invincible Summer"

December II

Charlie wakes to an empty bed, frowning at the lack of warmth. He assumes Knox is either downstairs or simply out for the day, maybe hanging out with Chris. He's no longer suffocated by jealousy when the two of them spend time together.

He spends the day with his roommates, sending texts to his boyfriend when he's bored. His latest is a photo of his mug of coffee, paired with *doesnt taste good unless u make it :(*

His afternoon is filled with helping Todd pack up his summer clothing to bring home, making room for fuzzy sweaters and thick materials. "Worried about Neil going home?" He asks hesitantly.

Todd nods, responding while he sorts through his shirts, "I always get anxious when he sees them."

"Me too. Told him to call every night."

Todd grins, "Me too. Guess we'll make it a conference."

Charlie laughs and Neil joins them a moment later, "Talking about me?" he asks before sitting between them.

"Yeah. Todd says he's going to leave you. Me, him, and Knox are going to become a throuple," Charlie says, completely seriously.

Neil mimics him, "Oh, that sounds great. Are you guys going to turn the living room into your sex den?"

"Definitely. I already bought a sex swing," Todd replies casually, and Charlie gives up, doubling over in laughter which the other two quickly join him in.

"Todd, what the fuck?" He manages when he catches a breath.

He throws his hands in the air, "I don't know! I was trying to go along with it. This is why I never do that stuff with you guys."

"That was a good start, babe," Neil reassures him.

-

They order Chinese food for dinner and sit at the dining table

together, the single empty chair distracting Charlie. He had managed to fight off his growing anxiety throughout the day, coming up with justifications as to why he hadn't heard from Knox yet, but he can't really take it anymore.

"Have you guys talked to Knox?" He asks, the rest of the Poets instantly shaking their heads. "He hasn't been home all day."

Meeks looks up from his plate, "Well, obviously. He went to go see his parents."

"What are you talking about?" Charlie asks him, suddenly annoyed. Everyone is supposed to go home tomorrow, and why would Knox leave without saying anything to him?

"I ran into him on the porch last night. It was late, maybe like, four? He told me he was going home and then he left," Meeks replies, sounding completely confident as he recalls the incident.

Everyone begins to talk over one another and Charlie struggles to think back on last night. It was an ordinary evening for them, he remembers calling Knox to bed and that was it.

"What the hell were you doing on the porch at four in the morning?"

"I was coming home! I was with a girl."

"There was probably an emergency, or something."

"Did he have any bags with him?"

"Charlie, are you sure he didn't mention this to you?"

Charlie stands from the table abruptly, "I'm pretty sure I would remember my boyfriend telling me he's leaving in the middle of the night," he snaps. He heads to his bedroom and pulls out his phone, typing a message to Knox rapidly.

you went home??? why didn't you tell me?

And another a minute later, *talk to me please*

He finds himself desperate for an answer, hoping for Knox to call him and provide him with a legitimate reason. With every passing minute his nerves grow. What did he do for him to simply get up and leave without saying a word? Neil enters the room and Charlie begins to voice his thoughts out loud, "Everything was going fine. Going great,

actually. So, what happened? He looked at me, fast asleep, and decided he was sick of seeing my face?"

"No way, Charlie," he tries.

"Give me one logical reason why he would walk out of here at four in the morning and not answer a single one of my messages all day," he says, tossing his phone on the bed before running his hands through his hair in frustration.

Neil stays silent, and Charlie thinks he might scream or cry. Maybe both. "I knew it was too good to be true," he sighs.

"Don't say that. You guys are crazy about each other," Neil responds,

"And maybe it was too much for him." He sits down and Neil joins him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. They sit in silence for the rest of the night, Charlie constantly checking his phone until his exhaustion gets the best of him and he falls asleep.

-

He spends the next twelve hours wallowing in self-pity, while simultaneously trying to convince the rest of the Poets that he's fine.

"Charlie, I swear I can just stay here for the rest of the week," Meeks says to him while they're standing on the porch, his eyes filled with sincerity.

"Your mother is literally waiting for you," he responds, waving at Meeks' mother as she sits in her car at the edge of the driveway. He's grateful for the unrelenting support he has from his friends, but he would rather suffer alone than derail their holiday plans.

He hugs him tightly. "You know I'll take your side in the divorce, right?"

Charlie laughs, "Of course." He doesn't say that he hopes there won't ever be a 'divorce.' He doesn't say that he's waiting for Knox to magically appear on their doorstep with an explanation and an apology.

The rest of the day proceeds almost identically, saying goodbye to his roommates one by one, all of them attempting to reassure him while he puts on his best poker face.

Todd is the last to go, and Charlie finds himself filled with relief when the house is finally empty. He heads upstairs and skips his room, standing in the doorway of Knox's room, considering getting into his bed. He ponders for a moment before deciding to not be completely and utterly pathetic, and he turns around, retreating to the living room sofa.

He tries to ignore the aching pain in his chest as he unwillingly recalls the last time he was on the couch, with Knox tucked in front of him, Charlie's arm slung around his waist, the two of them barely fitting on the cushions.

-

The next morning, Knox sits at the kitchen island, tuning out his mother's ramblings. He picks up his phone, hoping to find a distraction, but immediately puts it back down after seeing the missed messages he has from Charlie, which had accumulated to a total of ten since the night he left. He can't bring himself to open them.

His father joins them, pouring himself a mug of coffee before turning to Knox, and he prepares himself for whatever lecture he knows is coming.

"Have you received your grades for the term yet?"

"Nope. I think they get posted next week," he replies, fidgeting with his hands.

"I don't want to see anything less than a 3.5, son," he says, with the same serious tone he always uses when discussing his studies. Knox doesn't bother with a response, simply nodding his head.

At the end of his freshman year, he had a grade point average of 3.4, which resulted in an hour-long argument with his father on responsibilities and expectations.

"Are you planning on living in that same house next semester?" His father asks, and Knox fights the urge to roll his eyes.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I?" Meeks had come to an agreement with their landlord to rent the house until the end of their graduating year, which the rest of the Poets thought was a great idea. No hassle of moving in and out every Fall, and they weren't forced to spend the entire summer with their families.

“I don’t know about you staying there. That house is full of distractions, a bunch of young men in college, a significant distance away from your parents. I’ve talked to Steven’s father and he feels the same way,” he pauses to take a sip of his drink, and Knox considers picking up his phone and faking a call, anything to walk away from this.

“And don’t even get me started on the useless studies of your friends. Neil may be talented, but theatre won’t take him very far. What about that Dalton boy, Charles? I hate to say it but, his parents raised him wrong, not like we raised you, Knox. He doesn’t know a thing about studying or working hard.”

Knox swallows his fear and speaks up, his hands shaking underneath the counter, “Can you stop talking about them like they’re trash, please?”

His father dismisses him, waving his hand before he continues speaking, “Do you know what they say about him? They say that he’s a queer. Imagine my reaction when the dean told me the two of you are always hanging around each other.” Knox thought that this topic had been dropped, that it was only a one-time thing. A warning, which he now realizes has turned into something of a threat.

“He’s one of my oldest friends, dad,” is all he manages before standing from his chair and leaving the room. He ignores his mother’s voice calling him, fleeing to his bedroom and slamming the door.

He sits on his bed, toying with the blanket, attempting to calm down. He doesn’t notice that he’s started to cry until a tear lands on his thumb. He wishes he could properly defend Charlie and their relationship, but realizes there might not be anything left to speak for since he walked out on him three days ago.

Maybe it would just be easier if I stopped being such a screw-up and listened to my dad, he thinks. His phone buzzes with a new message from Charlie, and Knox feels his heart ache.

December III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie has not moved from the couch for anything other than the bare necessities since the Poets left. He had tried multiple times to simply get up, to clean, to go for a walk, to take a shower, to do anything useful, but just couldn't.

He spent his nights on the phone with Neil and Todd, and he was relieved to know that Mr. Perry was not in a fighting mood and had left Neil alone since his arrival. That was one of the only things that had improved his state of mind in the last week.

The other helpful factor was a message from Pitts to their group chat on Christmas day, reading *how pissed would u guys be if I brought home a cat?* Which was followed by a photo of Pitts grinning like a mad-man, holding a tiny, charcoal-colored kitten.

He had given up on his delusional dream of Knox coming home to him and hadn't messaged him since the 26th. However, this didn't stop him from spending concerning amounts of time looking through his camera roll, admiring the photos he had taken of him and Knox over the course of the term.

His current favorite was one from the end of October, a blurry image of the two of them in bed, Knox pressing a kiss to his cheek. He makes it his lock screen, long since given up the illusion of not being completely pathetic, as he's wrapped in Knox's duvet which he had pulled from his bed in a moment of insanity a day or two ago.

-

The next morning, his sadness finally turns into anger. He had been, once again, about to go through his photos when he noticed the tiny calendar icon on the screen. It was the 30th, and eight days since he last spoke to Knox. His emotions turned quickly, and he threw his phone to the other end of the sofa.

"Eight days. How can he ignore me for eight days?" He says out loud before picking up the duvet and tossing it to the other side of the room.

He demolishes the couch, throwing pillows and cushions, all while mumbling to himself. He shoves the duvet over before collapsing on the floor. *Eight fucking days is more than enough* he thinks. He's given Knox time to himself, and time to reach out to him, too. Even if he's done with him, Charlie still has the right to voice his thoughts and emotions, Knox leaving in the middle of the night doesn't take that away from him. Although it may have taken his dignity and sanity.

Charlie gets up quickly, looking for his phone, which he finds under one of the discarded pillows. He opens his texts with Knox, ignoring the fact that they haven't been read yet, and sends another message.

carpe diem

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Five hours later and he's in Vermont, his hand shaking as he lifts it to knock on the door of a house he's never entered before. He waits for it to open for what feels like a century, yet he nearly jumps when he hears the distinct click of it unlocking, and then Knox is standing there.

All the anger he had felt earlier in the day leaves his body the second he sees him. He looks drained, tired, and just sad. Charlie is pretty sure that he looks the same, if not worse. He wants to comfort him, to hold him, to kiss him.

"What are you doing here?" He asks, utter shock displayed on his features.

"I couldn't let eight days turn into nine," is what Charlie comes up with, and Knox steps outside, shutting the door behind him.

He places his hand on Charlie's arm, guiding them away from the door before he speaks, "I'm sorry."

"Wait. I need to say something to you first," he says, cutting him off before he has the chance to continue.

"I don't know why you left. I tried coming up with an answer for the last week, and I still don't know. What I do know are the freckles on your back. I know the scar on your hip from when you fell off the porch last year. I know how you like your coffee. I know that I've loved you since tenth grade. I know that I'm constantly scared of ruining this, of the Poets falling apart because of some mistake I made. I know that I would've ignored my feelings for the rest of my

life if you didn't kiss me in September."

He pauses, struggling to pull the note from his pocket, his hands still shaking from either the cold or his nerves. Snow falls around them, unbothered, leaving wet splotches on his paper, making the ink bleed.

Knox watches him patiently as he starts reading, "We have not touched the stars, nor are we forgiven, which brings us back to the hero's shoulders and a gentleness that comes, not from the absence of violence, but despite the abundance of it. I'll give you my heart to make a place for it to happen, evidence of a love that transcends hunger. Is that too much to expect? That I would name the stars for you? That I would take you there?"

He's fully shivering by the time he's finished, the cold air seeping through his coat and into his bones. He lifts his head and their eyes meet before Knox steps forward and erases the space between them.

They cling to each other desperately, starving for one another, and they don't separate until Knox begins to speak.

His voice shakes, but his eyes never leave Charlie's, "I left because I was worried about what my parents would think of us being together. Remember that night, my mother called?"

Charlie nods and he continues, "The dean mentioned to my parents that we're always together. I'm sure he didn't mean it in a bad way or anything, but my dad twists everything he hears to match his own agenda. He put the fear of God in me, and I felt like absolute shit. I'm sorry I left. I should've just talked to you."

His hand comes to rest on his cheek, providing a comforting warmth in contrast to the chilly air. "I love you so much, Charlie, it's all-encompassing. Like, my feelings for you are overwhelming. I didn't even know it was possible to love somebody like this. To want to spend every minute with them, to say their name like a prayer, to touch them like it's a part of a sacred ritual. But I want to spend the rest of my life feeling this way," he says, his tone completely earnest as he's practically rambling.

Charlie begins to feel tears in his eyes, Knox's heartfelt words replaying in his mind, and he leans in, joining their lips. They kiss as if it's their last time doing so, the two of them ardently clutching one another. They reluctantly pull apart for air but stay close, resting their foreheads against each other.

“I would name every star in the sky for you,” Knox whispers, and Charlie can’t help but kiss him again.

“Dating you makes me feel like I’m going to have a heart attack every time you say something romantic,” he responds.

Knox laughs and grabs his hand, “Let’s go home.”

“You sure?”

He nods, “Yeah. Don’t want to be here anymore,” and opens the door. His mother, known eavesdropper and town gossip, is standing just a few steps away.

Knox takes their jackets and hangs them up before approaching her, speaking while he still has the will to do so, “Mom, you remember Charlie? He’s my boyfriend.”

Her extended hand recoils slightly before it reaches Charlie’s, and she pauses for a moment, wide eyes darting between the two of them. But she recovers quickly, her palm sliding into his and shaking his hand, “Nice to see you again. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he replies before retreating to Knox’s side.

They step away, Knox intent on detouring his father and escaping with Charlie to his room. His mother reads his mind, “Your father is in the lounge,” she says before disappearing into the kitchen.

Knox leads them to his bedroom, and Charlie sits on the edge of his bed awkwardly as he watches him gather some clothes and things to bring back to their house.

His eyes wander around Knox’s room, noticing how different it is compared to their college house. There’s barely anything personal here, with a lack of posters, no photos of friends, zero annotated novels. There isn’t anything that really has a hint of Knox in it, and could be easily mistaken for a guest bedroom.

He buys their plane tickets back to Seattle, pondering on the amount of money they’ve spent on travelling in the last eight days and thinks that they should drive back, make a road trip out of it. He then realizes they don’t even have a car to take.

He snaps a photo of the other side of the room, as well as one with his face in it with the bed in the background. He sends the pictures to

their household group chat with *bout to hook up with this guy but before i do does anyone recognize his room?* And allows the panic to ensue.

Knox folds away one more sweater before zipping up his bag and approaching Charlie, standing between his knees. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah. Do you want me to sneak out your window and meet you outside, like we’re horny teenagers with a forbidden romance?” He suggests, raising his eyebrows and gesturing at the window.

“You are definitely the least ‘sneaky’ person I know, so no thanks. Want to call our ride and wait by the door while I say goodbye?”

He hums in agreement, standing up and pulling Knox’s bag on to his shoulder before calling their Uber. They part ways at the bottom of the staircase, Charlie trying to disappear into the wallpaper as he waits for him. He surveys the house, noting how grand it is, yet how empty it feels, like the life has been sucked out of the walls.

He returns just as Charlie begins to worry, and he doesn’t miss the troubled look on his features. They shrug their coats on and step outside, the snow crunching under their shoes as they approach their vehicle. “You okay?” He asks once they’re on route. He leans over and joins their hands.

“It went better than expected. I’m shocked I don’t have a split lip, or a black eye. I might be an orphan for a while, though.”

Charlie pities him, pressing a kiss to his knuckles before speaking, “I’m sorry.” Their friend group has been through this before, Neil being cut off from his father for nearly a year after he came out. Luckily his own parents are the opposite, rarely prying into his love life and accepting of his sexuality.

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They make it home a few minutes before midnight and usher in the New Year with a single shot each of Charlie’s favorite vodka before he insists on going to bed, feeling absolutely exhausted.

“It’s still so early, don’t be lazy. Let’s watch something,” Knox teases him.

Charlie, already halfway up the stairs, laughs, “I literally flew to Vermont and back today, which is a lot of work considering I spent the last week rotting on the couch. I’m allowed to be tired.”

Knox trails behind him, guilt seeping into him as he considers what he's put Charlie through. "I'm sorry that you had to get on a plane just to talk to me," he says.

Charlie waves his hand, dismissing the severity of the situation. He's glad that the entire situation is over with, with Knox back home and their relationship no longer in jeopardy, even if he had to go across the country to achieve it. "It's okay, we made it out alive," he pauses, turning into his room and grabbing the blanket from his bed before continuing to Knox's room. "Just, next time, please talk to me. Don't run away. I'll be dead broke in less than a week if we make this a habit," he tries to joke, to make light of everything.

"It won't happen, ever again. Dead poets honor," he responds, his voice filled with sincerity, and Charlie doesn't doubt him for a second.

They shower separately, both of them crawling into bed afterwards, with wet hair, smelling like shampoo and Knox's soap. "Love you," Charlie mumbles, and Knox presses his lips to the back of his neck, repeating the words back to him, burying them in his skin.

Chapter End Notes

> Charlie's lovely little poem to Knox is an excerpt from Richard Siken's "Snow and Dirty Rain".... and that's it! pls continue to go and suck the marrow out of life

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